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Father Cantalamessa on the Narrow Gate

Pontifical Household Preacher Comments on Sunday's Readings

ROME, AUG. 24, 2007 ([Zenit.org](http://www.zenit.org)).- Here is a translation of a commentary by the Pontifical Household preacher, Capuchin Father Raniero Cantalamessa, on the readings from this Sunday's liturgy.

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Enter Through the Narrow Gate

21st Sunday in Ordinary Time

Isaiah 66:18-21; Hebrews 12:5-7, 11-13; Luke 13:22-30

There is a question that has always nagged believers: Will there be many or few people saved? During certain periods this problem became so acute as to cause some people terrible anxiety.

This Sunday's Gospel informs us that Jesus himself was once asked this question. "Jesus passed through towns and villages, teaching as he went and making his way to Jerusalem. Someone asked him, 'Lord, will only a few people be saved?'"

The question, as we see, focuses on the number -- How many will be saved? Will it be many or few? In answering the question, Jesus shifts the focus from "how many" to "how" to be saved, that is, by entering "through the narrow gate."

We see this same attitude in regard to Jesus' second coming. The disciples ask "when" the return of the Son of Man will happen and Jesus answers indicating "how" we should prepare ourselves for that return, and what to do during the time of waiting (cf. Matthew 24:3-4).

Jesus' way of responding to these questions is not strange or discourteous. He is just acting in the way of one who wants to teach his disciples how to move from a life of curiosity to one of true wisdom; from the allure of idle questions to the real problems we need to grapple with in life.

From this we already see the absurdity of those who, like the Jehovah Witnesses, believe they know the precise number of the saved: 144,000.

This number, which recurs in the Book of Revelation has a purely symbolic value (the square of 12 -- the number of the tribes of Israel -- multiplied by 1,000) and is explained by the expression that immediately follows: "A great multitude that no man could number" (Revelation 7:4, 9).

Above all, if 144,000 is really the number, then we can both close up shop. Above the gate to heaven there must be a sign like the ones parking lots put up: "Full."

If, therefore, Jesus is not so much interested in revealing to us the number of the saved as he is in telling us

how to be saved, we can understand what he is trying to tell us here. In substance, there are two things: one negative and the other positive.

It is useless, or rather it is not enough, to belong to a certain ethnic group, race, tradition, or institution, not even the chosen people from whom the Savior himself comes. What puts us on the road to salvation is not a title of ownership ("We ate and drank in your presence..."), but a personal decision, followed by a consistent way of life. This is even more clear in Matthew's text which contrasts two ways and two gates, one narrow and the other wide (cf. Matthew 7:13-14).

Why are these ways respectively called "narrow" and "wide"? Is it perhaps that the way of evil is always easy and pleasant to follow and the way of goodness always hard and tiresome?

Here we must be careful not to cede to the usual temptation of believing that here below everything goes magnificently well for the wicked and everything goes terribly for the good.

The way of the wicked is wide, but only at the beginning. As one goes down this way it gradually becomes narrow and bitter. In any case, it becomes very narrow at the end because it finishes in a blind alley.

The joy that is experienced in it has the characteristic of diminishing more and more as one tastes it, and it finally causes nausea and sadness. We see this in certain forms of intoxication experienced in drugs, alcohol and sex. A larger dose or stronger stimulation is needed each time to produce pleasure of the same intensity.

Finally the organism no longer responds and it begins to break down, even physically.

The way of the just is instead narrow at the beginning, when one starts off on it, but it then becomes a spacious boulevard because hope, joy and peace of heart are found in it.

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